

THE AGE OF CONSTANTINE: TRADITION AND INNOVATION

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THE conversion of Constantine was an event of such ecumenical importance that there is danger that all other aspects of his reign will be obliterated by it. As to that event, almost every conceivable position has been taken and defended; but, in spite of the loud assertions of certainty, we are left in the end with the conjectures of individuals as to the inner life of another individual dead these sixteen hundred years. The understanding of other aspects of his time has, however, been growing, and it is to assemble and relate the points of view regarding these that the Symposium of 1966 was organized around *The Age of Constantine: Tradition and Innovation*.

The dependence of any period on that preceding it is a familiar enough truth, but it sometimes needs a reminder. When an individual looms so large that an age is called by his name the illusion may be created that it is his handiwork. There must have been many contemporaries of Constantine, friends and foes alike, as there have been many since, so impressed by his dominant position that it has seemed to them that no other figure is of real significance. But this is not a view that any historian can accept. Even those who see in him the revolutionary that Julian called him must recognize how much of logical development is in the background of his innovations. Indeed, there were some who were able to shut their eyes to the realities of their time and believe that Rome was eternal in the sense of unchangeable. Professor Andrew Alföldi ("The Main Antagonist of Constantine: The Roman Senate") showed with what persistence the traditions of the Roman Senate upheld the faith of that august body and allowed it to believe in a future as static as the past.

There were patterns of organization which Constantine had obviously borrowed from

his predecessors. The theory and practice of associated rulers in charge of different territories yet all sharing an undivided sovereignty, which Diocletian had introduced, was revised by Constantine in the measures he took to divide the Empire between his sons. The defense of the state rested on military arrangements beginning in the early Empire, continued essentially intact by Diocletian, and accepted with modifications by Constantine.

In the social and economic structure of the Empire and in its administration Professor John L. Teall's analysis ("The Age of Constantine: Change and Continuity in Administration and the Economy") reveals fewer instances of contrast than of supplement. Some important changes are evident. Diocletian's revolutionary experiment with the control of prices could not be renewed, while, on the other hand, a useful element of stability was introduced by fixing the standard of the gold solidus. This could not of itself balance the budget and Constantine was no more able than his predecessors or his successors to make the state pay its own way; but the intelligent use of windfalls did allow him to increase efficiency by bringing into a system Diocletian's experiments in delegation of duties. The size and power of the bureaus were increased and new agencies had to be devised to maintain contact between the sovereign and his people. While as a lawgiver Constantine was reproached with being a revolutionary and is still so regarded by some, the conservative elements in his record are as important as the radical ones; in the administration of justice there was still a place for the participation of the emperor in his old role as magistrate of the Roman People, while in characteristic fashion functioning of the permanent corps of government officials continued with modifications, but without interruptions.

A question of great interest and importance is how an age will represent the sovereign. Using the coin portraits as a framework, reliable because both their date and place of issue are known, Professor Evelyn B. Harrison ("The Constantinian Portrait") discussed Constantinian portraits in the round. The early distinction between Eastern and Western coin styles gave place to a more homogeneous treatment first apparent in the East and possibly showing the influence of contemporary Sassanian coins. There was no invariable parallel between portraits in the round and the coins. Material from Asia Minor displays a conservatism which has been mistakenly supposed to be native to Athens, and carving in porphyry is further evidence that there was no uniform Eastern style of portraits in the round corresponding to the coin portraits. Two basic types whose use may have been the result of official policy go back to a time before the deification of rulers: a massive head of Heracles, most familiar from its adoption by Alexander, who, however, also made use of the other type: Apollo, brilliantly displayed on silver of the Chalcidic League. Both types were used by Roman emperors; the Heracles head much influenced the portraits of the Tetrarchy, while the inspired musician, Apollo, better fulfilled the Christian concept of sovereignty and held the field on the later coins of Constantine.

The visible remains of the period include not only the familiar monuments, but also recent discoveries of unexpected importance. Professor Irving Lavin ("The Ceiling Frescoes in Trier and Illusionism in Constantinian Painting") dealt with the significance and the wider implications of the frescoes dating from the central part of Constantine's reign lately discovered by excavation at Trier. They bear witness to a classical revival which appears also in other works of the time. Here, however, it recalls a kind of illusionism which is descended from Hellenistic art, and which had a continuous life in the Greek East, but had largely died out in the West. The solidity of the forms and the use of optical refinements produce a sense of reality very different from Western development of the later Pompeian style into a purely linear system of decoration.

But this return to the use of an old manner is not to be understood simply as a conservative reaction. Its vitality in the East lapsed and disappeared; but in the West it was transformed from a reminiscent to an inventive force which had contributions to make to the art of the Middle Ages.

Professor Ernst Kitzinger ("The Christian Frieze Sarcophagus") discussed the Christian frieze sarcophagus, the only phenomenon in Christian art, aside from the basilica, which is connected specifically with the age of Constantine. Known only in the Latin West (Italy, Southern Gaul, Spain), it came into vogue about A.D. 310 and dominated funerary sculpture in that area until about A.D. 340. Though rooted, by its emphasis on biblical narrative, in the development of Christian sculpture of the immediately preceding period, the frieze sarcophagus, as originally conceived, nevertheless constituted a radically new departure, differing, as it did, from earlier funerary sculpture, both pagan and Christian, by its extraordinarily succinct mode of representation. Visual aids were reduced to a minimum and the relief was packed with content. The constituent elements—isocephalous alignment of figures, "short hand" scene, polycyclical narrative—were all known in Roman art, but their combination produced a new and specifically Christian artifact. Professor Kitzinger suggested that the phenomenon reflected a crisis in the Christian attitude toward graven images, a reaction called forth by the preceding development of Christian pictorial art and by the new opportunities that came with peace-time conditions. The result was a recrudescence of deep-seated scruples, which the frieze sarcophagus with its unprecedented emphasis on content and messages was meant to allay.

The triumph of the new faith made necessary building operations on a large scale, and Constantine's architects found at hand one of the most versatile of ancient structures: the basilica, whose importance in the age was discussed by Professor Richard Krautheimer ("The Constantinian Basilica"). The republican basilicas of Rome had been large buildings used for various purposes, but about A.D. 300 the association of them with the emperor had resulted in a quasi-

religious character, making it an obvious form for the new churches of which Constantine was providing a great number. Their structure was dependent upon different considerations: regional preferences favored special types and so did the particular functions they were designed to serve. Holy places, cemeteries, and shrines of the martyrs could have their appropriate buildings, as could general worship and the official seats of the bishops. But these variations were of detail; the basilica as a genus comprised them all. Simplicity of structure was often accompanied by lavish decoration and the foundations of the Emperor himself were of great splendor.

For, as demonstrated by Professor Johannes A. Straub ("Constantine as KOINOS EPISKOPOS"), the Christian Church encountered an unprecedented problem when faced with a sovereign who was not an enemy but a friend and protector. The solution was that of the Emperor, who, in assuming the position of KOINOS EPISKOPOS, announced his intention of active participation in the life of the Church and not benevolence alone. How far that carried him beyond supervision of Christian action to control of Christian belief was discussed by Professor Milton Anastos ("The Heretics, the Orthodox, and Their Philosophical Sources") who showed how the same ingredients of ancient philosophy had provided the creeds of Orthodox and Heretics alike, and who saw in Constantine not merely acceptance of the conclusions of the bishops, but positive theological convictions which he intended to make the standard of his subjects and fellow-believers.

The Reverend Massey H. Shepherd, Jr. ("Liturgical Expressions of the Constantinian Triumph") made it clear that the center of

Constantine's interest was in the sanctification of his own age rather than in preparation for the life to come. The training of his sons as ardent Christians, the emphasis on daily worship at court, the prominence of the feasts of Christmas and Epiphany, the new importance of the *martyria* are illustrations of his concern for the existing Church as an entity in time as well as in eternity. And the splendor of the cathedrals and the graves of the martyrs were a constant demonstration to the people of the devotion of their sovereign.

Professor Bellinger recalled that there is a building which is perhaps the most convenient epitome of the *Tradition and Innovation of the Age of Constantine*. The familiar arch in Rome which celebrated his victory over Maxentius was erected for Constantine by the Senate and People of Rome. Its proportions are admirable and show that there were still competent architects to be employed in 312. The supply of sculptors was not so ample. To provide the arch with fitting decoration, sculpture was taken from buildings of Trajan, Hadrian, and Commodus; yet not at random, but in conformity with a well arranged plan. Earlier imperial portraits were recut as Constantine and Licinius converted the second century to the use of the fourth without impairing the essential decorative value of the old material. It is clear that the new generation cared for the art of its ancestors. Yet, when more sculptures were to be added as a memorial of this particular triumph, the ideas and the style were those of the age to come. The arch is a passageway from the pagan world to the Christian and cannot be understood without recognizing its past and envisioning its future.